

Six Reasons to Support our Local Organic Farmers

by Mary Boyts

1. Healthy Top Soil.

Our farmland is washing away at an alarming rate; about three billion tons each year. This is largely due to the development and widespread practice of monoculture, where the same crop in the same soil is replanted year after year. This consistent planting has led to massive nutrient loss reducing our cropland to more or less sand that is then pumped full of chemical fertilizers. Corn is notorious for depleting the land of its minerals and 80% of corn grown in this country goes to feed livestock. The lack of crop rotation also encourages agricultural pests.

2. Friendly Insects Survive.

When the forty billion tons of petrochemicals are dumped into our environment each year, they take many helpful insects along with the unwanted pests. Many of the natural enemies of agricultural pests have been wiped out as have a large number of natural crop pollinators -- bees. The widespread use of pesticides has resulted in ever tougher pests to fight. There are now literally hundreds of insects that have developed resistance to pesticides which sends scientists back to the lab perpetuating a vicious cycle. There are over twenty insects that nothing, short of stomping on them, will kill. Despite this chemical warfare, today there are a higher percentage of crops lost to insects than in 1940.

3. Cleaner Drinking Water.

There are hundreds of EPA approved insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers for use in agriculture and much of it ends up in our streams, rivers, lakes and groundwater. The EPA has detected 98 pesticides in the groundwater of forty states. That means that over 10 million people in this country alone are drinking contaminated water. Unfortunately the contamination is here for years as there is virtually no way to remove pesticides from groundwater.

4. Less Is More.

The EPA has approved over three hundred different "active pesticide ingredients" for agricultural use. Over 70 of them are possible or probable carcinogens. Conventionally grown peaches, tomatoes, cabbage and strawberries are especially high in detectable pesticide residue. Just because the FDA can't detect it doesn't mean it isn't there. Remember that conventional produce grown outside the U.S. may have been treated with chemicals that have been banned for use here in the U.S. The FDA tests only about one percent of all food shipments and 2% of imported produce.

5. More Nutritional Bang For Your Buck.

Produce that is grown locally is the freshest you can buy. It often goes from the field to your table within hours. A recent study at a west Chicago minerals lab found that some of their local organic produce contained, on the average, nearly twice as much of the 22 beneficial nutrients as the conventionally grown foods did. Not only is fresh produce more nutritious, it will also store longer and tastes great!

6. Taking A Stand.

Every time you buy organic produce you are voicing your concern for your friends, neighbors, and the earth. Purchasing locally grown produce means you are supporting farmers right here and that helps the local economy. While organic produce costs more, largely because of the intensive labor involved, the price is right!

Sources:

Pesticide Alert, Mott and Snyder, Sierra Club Books, 1987.

Diet for A New America, video, John Robbins, community Television of Southern California, 1991.

The Way We Grow, Anne Witte Garland, Berkeley Books, 1993.

(Mary Boyts works with the Community Mercantile in Lawrence, KS. We appreciate her permission to reprint this article originally featured in *Community Mercantile Newsletter*, August 1995)

THE TRUE COSTS OF INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE

Big Agribusiness likes to say that Americans enjoy the lowest food prices in the world. But is our food really that cheap? No, it isn't. So called "modern" U. S. agriculture enjoys a broad array of subsidies from both current taxpayers and future generations of citizens. Most Americans are already familiar with the government subsidies that go directly to grain farmers, special arrangements for sugar and tobacco farmers, and the grant of water and grazing rights at well below market rates. But agribusiness is subsidized as well in more subtle ways that place sustainable agriculture at a disadvantage.

SOIL EROSION

A recent study published in Science (Feb. 24, 1995) estimated that soil erosion in the United States causes damages of about \$44 billion each year. About \$20 billion of this is attributed to the loss of nutrients in the soil. While well known soil conservation techniques, like reduced tillage and contour plowing, apply to all methods of growing crops, certain techniques inherent to the production of organically grown foods are superior to chemical production.

Natural Soils. Organic farmers believe that proper soil management is critical to their success. They build up their soils with natural organic matter so earth worms and other denizens of the soil can thrive. As a consequence their soils tend to be better aggregated and more porous. Organically farmed soils soak up more rainfall, resulting in less runoff and soil loss. In contrast synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are toxic to soil organisms. Thus chemically farmed soils pack down easily and increase runoff of rainwater.

Crop Rotation. Crop rotation and use of cover crops are also critical to organic farming. Crop rotation discourages the build up of harmful pests from year to year. Nitrogen fixing cover crops, like alfalfa and clover, add nutrients and organic matter to the soil. The amount of time that a particular field is "bare" to the elements is minimized. In contrast, conventional farmers plant the same fields with the same crops year after year. They rely on chemicals to kill pests and on synthetic fertilizers to add nutrients. While "no till" methods can help limit erosion, some farmers like "clean fields" with nothing visible but the desired plant and the dirt it grows in. These fields are highly susceptible to runoff and soil erosion.

TRUE COSTS OF PESTICIDE USE

Pesticides are a major cost factor in the production of food in the United States each year, amounting to some \$4 billion in 1990. But this figure is a mere fraction of the real cost of using pesticides. According to a recent study published in Bioscience (Nov. '92), some \$8 billion in additional costs are associated with the use of pesticides, including public health impacts, loss of fish, birds and trees, and groundwater contamination. Ironically, some \$200 million is spent for government regulation of chemical use each year to prevent even more damage. These costs are not incorporated in the cost of the food you buy. Thus the price of foods grown with chemicals is subsidized by both the taxpayer and the environment.

CORPORATE HOG FARMS

Traditional, diversified family farmers allow hogs to root in pastures where manure returns naturally to enrich the land, or they keep hogs in spacious, partially covered pens where manure is removed dry and spread on nearby fields. Now, increasingly, large corporations are crowding thousands of hapless animals into enclosed buildings where they spend their entire lives standing over pits filled with manure and urine. Even though they are plied with antibiotics and growth hormones, some die from respiratory and other diseases related to high density confinement. Manure is periodically pumped to huge cess pools that often pollute the groundwater and nearby streams. So much manure is produced that it cannot be efficiently utilized in nearby fields. Most of the ammonia is vented to the atmosphere, and the smell is so bad that it often sickens neighbors. The federal government now plans to give \$100 million a year to livestock producers to clean up their mess, another hidden cost of "modern" agriculture.

ConAgra is a vertically integrated company that literally operates across the food chain. ConAgra is one of the largest fertilizer dealers, sells seeds, has multiple elevator companies, is among the largest beef, pork and poultry slaughters and has many consumer brands. Major Brands include:

Hunt's
Healthy Choice
Wesson
Orville Redenbacher
Act II
Peter Pan
Van Camp's
Manwich
Snack Pack
Swiss Miss
Knott's Berry Farm
Chun King
La Choy
Rosarita
Gebhardt
Wolf Brand
Banquet
Marie Callender's
Kid Cuisine

Butterball
Morton
Patio
Mediterranea.
Butterball
Country Pride
County Line
Eckrich
Swift Premium
Armour
Cook's
Hebrew National
Decker
Longmont
Brown 'N Serve
Golden Star
Webber's
National Deli

GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOODS .

PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW

PEOPLE HAVE THE BASIC RIGHT TO KNOW WHAT'S IN THEIR FOOD. THEREFORE ALL FOODS CONTAINING GENETICALLY ENGINEERED COMPONENTS SHOULD BE LABELED AS SUCH, AT LEAST FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE AND UNTIL WE HAVE LONG TERM EXPERIENCE AND STUDY TO RELY ON.

CERTAIN TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS ARE TRYING TO PREVENT THE MANDATORY LABELING OF GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOODS BY LOBBYING THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION THAT PROVIDES ENFORCABLE STANDARDS TO THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION, CALLED CODEX ALIMENTARIUS. THEY WANT THESE FOODS ALLOWED IN EVERY COUNTRY WITHOUT LABELLING OR EXTENSIVE TESTING, AND MIXED IN WITH OTHER FOODS.

Also, international trade bureaucrats, in cooperation with transnational corporations, attempted last year to get rid of "Ecolabeling" which allows product manufacturers to distinguish their products as beneficial or less harmful to health and the environment. Their effort has been beaten back by national environmental groups for now, but they'll be back for another try.

All sovereign nations should have the right to use Ecolabeling to properly describe the content and environmental impact of any food and its method of production and harvesting. No national or international governmental agency, such as the World Trade Organization, should have the power to prevent Ecolabeling. To do so would, in effect, abridge citizens' right of free speech.

PLEASE CONTACT YOUR CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVES AND ASK THEM TO SAFEGUARD YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW BY SUPPORTING MANDATORY LABELING OF GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOODS AND OUR RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH THROUGH THE USE OF ECOLABELING

Prepared by the Food Circle Project, Kansas City, Mo.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Visit your local Wal-Mart and write to the company at 702 SW Eighth St., Bentonville, AR 72716-8611. Tell management that a warning label should be placed on irradiated meat, which the company is planning to sell at a premium price.
- Ask your local grocery stores if they plan to sell irradiated meat and let Public Citizen know if they do. Ask the manager not to carry irradiated food products because the labels required are misleading and often hard to read.
- Tell establishments that you frequent that you do not want to eat irradiated food.
- Ask your school and local school board to pledge that irradiated food products will not be served to your children. No labeling is required for food products sold in schools, restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes or by food service businesses.
- Become a citizen activist. Contact us and find out how you can get involved.
- Write to Vice President Gore and tell him that you want the Clinton Administration to maintain the FDA's current labeling requirement.

For more information and sample letters ... visit our Web site at WWW.CITIZEN.ORG/CMEP or contact us at Public Citizen, 215 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, Washington, DC 20003. 202-546-4996.

MORE
FACTS
ON

IRRADIATION

IRRADIATION provides a quick fix for foodborne disease. Food used to be produced locally and consumers knew their grocers and butchers personally. Now food is produced by large multinational corporations and there is very little accountability.

A good example is beef. Many cows are raised in city-sized feedlots where they are squeezed together in filthy and inhumane conditions. The cows, covered in feces, urine and pus, are transported to large, industrial slaughterhouses where as many as 300 cows an hour are killed. Not only is the quality control in slaughterhouse and packaging facilities questionable, the hamburger you eat today may be from multiple cows. Bacteria and other microorganisms can flourish in these conditions and yet there are many fewer food inspectors than a decade ago.

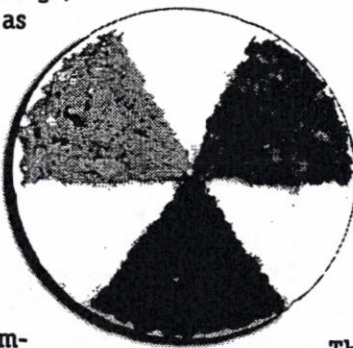
For the food industry, irradiation is a quicker and cheaper fix than solving the complex problems with the way our food is produced.

IRRADIATION extends shelf life. An even bigger (although not as public) reason that the food industry wants food irradiation is that it extends shelf life, which means bigger profits. Imagine, ground beef is sitting in the supermarket up to 35 days. Strawberries and mushrooms can stay in the refrigerator for three weeks. This means major savings for the food industry!

IRRADIATION gives nuclear technologies a new use. The nuclear industry is very enthusiastic about a new use for their dying industry. Ever since the first nuclear

bombs were exploded, nuclear engineers have been seeking new industrial applications for nuclear energy and a use for nuclear waste. But irradiation creates a whole new radioactive waste stream and poses real health threats to workers.

► MORE ON SAFETY



Unfortunately, no long-term studies have been done on how eating irradiated food will affect human health. Most of the research on food irradiation was conducted in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. There is ample evidence that food irradiation causes the creation of new chemicals in our food, which could be toxic or cancer-causing.

The nutritional value of food is lessened by irradiation. Vitamins A, B1, K and E are destroyed. Also, extending the shelf life of food decreases the amount of vitamins in food.

The FDA did not rely on any tests of toxicity or cancer to conclude that irradiated food is safe. The agency used a theoretical mathematical calculation of how many new chemicals would be created in the irradiation process. From this, they determined that food irradiation is safe. At the very least, they should be required to reopen the question of safety and to use new, unbiased re-search to make a determination about safety.

THE PROBLEM

Many corporate factory farms use dirty food handling practices. Meat is regularly contaminated with feces, urine, pus and other contaminants that spread disease.

Rather than cleaning up these food factories and hiring more food inspectors, the food industry, along with politicians who receive large campaign donations from the industry, want a quick and cheap fix.

THE FACTORY FARM SOLUTION

Irradiate the food! This doesn't clean up filth, but it does kill disease-causing bacteria.

Irradiation also increases food shelf life. This is important to transnational corporate food systems so food can be transported farther and farther away from the farm and treated as if it is a non-perishable product.

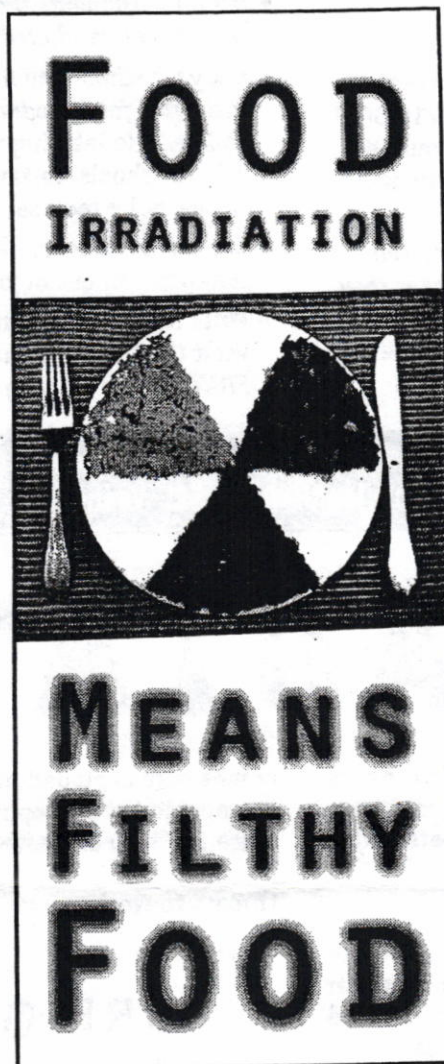
FORTUNATELY

The American public thinks irradiated food should be labeled (Additionally, polls show that Americans won't buy meat, vegetables, or fruit that's been irradiated).

UNFORTUNATELY

The corporate food industries' solution to the public's concern: Keep the public in the dark. Stop labeling! The public "can't refuse to buy what they can't identify."

Our government, under food and nuclear industry pressure, is attempting to take away our right to know whether our food has been irradiated or not.



IS IT SAFE?

No one knows. No long term-studies have been conducted. The government and industry are operating under the principle "no information is good information." Irradiating food destroys vitamins A, B1, C, K, and E, forms new, potentially carcinogenic, chemical compounds, and could potentially create mutant bacteria and viruses.

WHO WANTS TO ZAP OUR FOOD?

For the past twenty-five years, the food and nuclear industries have used

their enormous resources to lobby for food irradiation. They have used campaign contributions to influence federal food safety laws and paid universities to do pro-irradiation research.

Because the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is so heavily influenced by the corporations it regulates, it is more concerned about the bottom line of the corporate food industry than the health and safety of the American consumer.

WHICH FOODS ARE IRRADIATED?

Today, many spices and dry vegetable seasonings are irradiated. It is also legal to irradiate beef, poultry, pork, lamb, vegetables, fruit and grains, but because consumers won't buy irradiated food that is labeled as such, only small amounts of these foods are irradiated.

IS ALL IRRADIATED FOOD LABELED?

Irradiated food items sold in retail establishments, like grocery stores, are supposed to be labeled, but restaurants, hospitals, schools and food services do not have to notify their customers.

Last summer, the FDA opened a comment period on labeling irradiated food. More than 20,000 people told the FDA that they want to continue to have the right to know if their food is irradiated. Sometime in the near future, the FDA will present a proposed rule on labeling. The agency is being heavily pressured by the food and nuclear industry to stop requiring labeling of irradiated food.

THIS INFORMATION IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY:

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